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ABSTRACT

Written for American Indian parents, this fact sheet offers basic suggestions for building good parent-school relationships and helping children succeed in school. The first issue addressed is the education of children before they start to school, and the emphasis is on developing pride, self-confidence, and a desire to learn and do new things. Suggestions for parents include teaching American Indian culture by telling stories of American Indian traditions, by teaching American Indian songs and dances, and by explaining special tribal ceremonies. The parents of school-age children are encouraged to get to know the school itself and the people who are involved in teaching their children. A meeting with the principal is recommended as a way to find out about school rules, the school bus system, meal plans, medical services, culture and language classes, and extracurricular activities. The format and content of parent-teacher conferences are described. Advice for parents includes making a list of questions to ask the teacher as well as telling the teacher something helpful about the child. The roles of Parent Advisory Councils and of school boards are outlined, and the importance of parent involvement in these organizations is stressed. (JHZ)

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Parents' Roles and Responsibilities In Indian Education

By

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PARENTS' ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES IN INDIAN EDUCATION

You are a very important person. As a parent, you have one of the most difficult jobs in society - raising your children to be responsible, independent adults.

All parents care about their children. They want them to be happy and have a good life. But sometimes, parents do not know how to help their children toward this good life. One way that all parents can help is to be sure that their children receive the very best education possible. To do this, there must first be good schools, concerned parents and teachers, and children who want to learn.

There are many ways that you can improve the schools your children will attend. There are ways for you to communicate with your children's teachers so that your children will be better understood. There are ways you can increase your children's desire to learn.

This paper offers some ideas on how you, as an American Indian parent, can help your children get the very best education possible.

What can I teach my children before they start to school?

There are many things you can teach your children before they enter school for the first time. In fact, some of your children's most important lessons will be learned at home with you acting as the teacher.

Your children are special. As American Indians, they have a rich culture of which they can be very proud. They will want to learn as much about their Indian heritage as they can. You can teach your children about their culture by telling them stories of Indian traditions, by teaching them Indian songs and dances, and by explaining special tribal ceremonies to them. By doing this, you will make your children proud of their Indian heritage.

You will want your children to learn the language of their tribe, but do not forget to teach them the majority language which is English. Your children must be able to function in a mostly white world. If they are able to speak and understand English when they begin their formal education, your children will adjust more easily to their new surroundings.

Show your children that you are interested in what they do. Talk to them about things they like. Ask them questions. When your children ask you questions, take time to answer. By letting your children know that you think they are important, they will feel important.

You can teach your children about responsibility by giving them simple jobs to do and making sure the jobs are done; for example, picking up toys, making their bed, or taking care of younger brothers and sisters. Let your children know you are proud of them when they do their work. This will encourage them to do a good job. You can also teach your children to respect their elders and the importance of sharing with others.

Spend time with your children doing special things. You can teach them crafts such as beading or weaving. They can go with you to tribal meetings and ceremonies. You can take them hiking, fishing, or on camping trips. Let them make a visit to a public library, and take them to ethnic restaurants to sample different foods. Take them on trips to places they have never been; perhaps a zoo, museum, or tribal complex. Talk to your children about the places they go and the new sights they see.

It is important for small children to develop pride, self-confidence, and a desire to learn and do new things. These resources will help them a great deal when they finally enter school.

How can I help my school-age children?

The first step in helping your children after they enter school is for you to get to know the school itself and the people who are involved in teaching your children. You should not feel uncomfortable about going to the school because you are welcome there. School administrators and teachers like to know that parents are interested in their children's education.

Here are some things you need to know about your children's school: you should know the name of the school, the telephone number, and the address. You should know the name of the school principal and the names of your children's teachers.

When you visit the school for the first time, meet with the principal and ask him/her questions about school rules, the school bus system, meal plans, and what kind of medical services the school provides. The principal can also tell you if there are other programs your children might be interested in, such as culture and language classes, arts and crafts programs, or extracurricular activities such as sports teams or special interest clubs.

There are many ways you can help at the school. Jobs you might enjoy include reading stories to the children, teaching them songs or telling students about Indian culture. Parents can be a big help to the teacher in planning field trips or acting as chaperones on trips. Often, if a teacher's aide is not available, the teacher will need an interpreter for those Indian children who do not speak English.

Many schools now have in-service programs for teachers who will be working with Indian children. Parents and other community members instruct the teachers on tribal life and customs. Involvement in teacher in-service will give you an opportunity to get to know the teachers who will be working with your children. Check with the principal to see if such a program exists at your children's school.

You can help your children at home by making sure they have a quiet place for study and homework, and by assisting them with homework and in studying for tests. Look over the papers they bring home from school, and praise them when they make good grades. Encouragement and approval will make your children want to do their best at school.

What is the purpose of parent-teacher conferences?

Parent-teacher conferences are very important meetings between you and your children's teachers. The main purpose of these meetings is to help your children make better progress at school. This can be done easily if communication between you and the teacher is strong.

Many schools have parent-teacher conferences two or three times during the school year. Usually the teachers will send a note home with your children, telling you when the parent-teacher conference will be held. You will probably have a different meeting for each child.

Before you go to the meeting, make a list of questions that you would like to ask the teacher. Think about what you might be able to tell the teacher about your child. It is often very helpful to relate how your child feels about the teacher, classes, and other children in his/her class.

If you have young children, it is a good idea to leave them with a babysitter so that you and the teacher can talk without being interrupted. The teacher will be expecting you, so try to be on time.

During the meeting, the teacher will explain the school's grading system and will tell you what your child has been studying. The

teacher may offer suggestions on how you can help your child with schoolwork at home. If your child is having any special problems at school, the teacher will discuss them with you, and together, the two of you can find a way to correct the problems. If there are any problems your child is having at home, tell the teacher about them so that your child will be better understood.

During the meeting, you can find out what school activities are being planned and when they will be held. You can also ask the teacher for ideas on how you might be able to help at the school.

A parent-teacher conference is a good time to go to your children's school, but do not make it the only time you go. Visit your children's classrooms often so that you can see for yourself how they are doing. Ask the teacher about times that would be good for classroom visits. Your children and the other students in the class will be happy to see that you are interested in what they are learning.

What is a Parent Advisory Council?

A Parent Advisory Council (PAC) is a group of people like yourself - parents and community members - who are concerned about the quality of education in their schools. By becoming a member of your local PAC, you can help improve the schools your children attend.

The PAC does many different things. It advises the school of any special difficulties a student might have due to cultural or language differences or other problems. It sponsors teacher in-service programs on many topics, it advises the school on preparing new programs that will be used in the school and reviews programs that are already in use. The PAC makes recommendations for improvements, and it takes action on complaints. Individual members of the Council may observe classes and hold discussions with teachers.

The PAC can benefit American Indian students by making sure the school provides bilingual instructors for students who do not speak English and for those students who want to learn both English and their native language. The PAC can also bring about the removal of textbooks and tests which show a cultural bias against Indians.

You can find out more about your local Parent Advisory Council by talking to the principal at your children's school. The PAC is a good way for concerned parents to be involved in their children's education.

What is the function of the school board?

The school board, or board of education, is the governing council of the school district. It is the board's responsibility to hire all school personnel, determine the school's curriculum, and make decisions regarding the school's budget. It handles problems regarding school attendance and drop-outs, lunch programs, and determines what new facilities are needed. In short, the school board makes nearly all the decisions regarding operation of the schools in its district.

Members of the board are elected by voters in the school district and usually hold their position for two or three years. It is an important job which requires a certain amount of skill, time and commitment, but board members often find that the satisfaction they gain from working to improve the education and schools in their district is well worth the effort involved.

More and more school districts are realizing the importance of electing American Indian board members to represent the interests of their Indian students. Indian representation will help to promote the hiring of American Indian instructors and the inclusion of Indian-oriented programs into the school's curriculum.

If you are interested in running for a position on your local board of education, you should first learn all you can about the board's duties and responsibilities. Make an effort to attend as many public school board meetings as you can, and talk to individual members. They are probably your best source of information. Involvement in other school organizations such as the Parent-Teacher Association and the Parent Advisory Council will help you become more familiar with the school and how it is run.

Would you like more information on how you can be involved in your children's education? Write ERIC/CRESS (address below) and ask for these books:

Career Education and the American Indian: A Notebook for Parents and Teachers (ED 204 079)

Continuing a College Education: A Guide for the Family of the American Indian Student (ED 213 550)

How Communities and American Indian Parents Can Identify and Remove Culturally Biased Books from Schools (ED 167 337)

Indian Parent Involvement in Education: A Basic Source Book (ED 076 273)

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